



## **MEDIA STATEMENT**

### **FLOREY MEDAL HONOURS LIFETIME OF SCIENTIFIC ACHIEVEMENT**

Western Australian molecular ophthalmologist Professor Elizabeth Rakoczy from UWA's Centre for Ophthalmology and Visual Science and the Lions Eye Institute (LEI) will receive the 2017 Florey Medal at a ceremony in Canberra this evening.

The Florey Medal, established by the Australian Institute of Policy and Science, recognises significant lifetime achievement in biomedical science and/or human health advancement and carries a \$50,000 prize supported by CSL Limited.

Professor Rakoczy propelled the pioneering research that led to the development of a new gene therapy for wet age-related macular degeneration (wet AMD).

Wet AMD – the most common cause of blindness in the developed world - causes central vision loss and is currently treated with invasive monthly eye injections.

The new gene therapy, which is proving to be safe and well-tolerated in human trials, promises to replace monthly injections with a one-off treatment.

“It is our hope that in the next few years, millions of people suffering from wet AMD will be able to have single injection therapy to control their condition,” Professor Rakoczy said.

The science behind the new treatment began more than 20 years ago when Professor Rakoczy was recruited to UWA and the LEI.

It was the first research in Australia using gene therapy in ophthalmology or any other medical field and was named by the National Health and Medical Research Council in its 10 of the best national research projects in 2005.

UWA Vice-Chancellor Professor Dawn Freshwater and LEI Managing Director Professor David Mackey said the Florey Medal recognised that Professor Rakoczy's body of work was of international importance.

“Professor Rakoczy's research over the past three decades has impacted so many lives,” Professor Freshwater said.

“It's fitting that this prestigious prize should go to a woman in Western Australia who has worked in her field with great diligence and persistence.”

Professor Mackey said the gene therapy for wet AMD was an example of a basic research project that could be translated into a revolutionary treatment for patients.

Professor Rakoczy said her research demonstrated how a scientific discovery could make a fundamental difference.

“Before we understood what drives blood vessel growth in the retina, as recently as 10 years ago, wet AMD was untreatable,” she said.



“I have been fortunate to be around when recombinant gene technology became available so we could turn infectious viruses into useful delivery vehicles to develop localised ‘biofactories’ of a desired medication. In this case, in the back of the eye in the retina.”

She paid tribute to the more than 50 scientists, cell and molecular biologists, physicists, statisticians, virologists, veterinary scientists, ophthalmologists and students who worked together to bring the treatment to fruition.

The original laboratory work that led to the trial was supported during the early 1990s by the NHMRC, Juvenile Diabetes International, Foundation for the Prevention of Blindness USA, Richard Pearce Bequest, Retina Australia and the Lions Save-Sight Foundation (LSSF).

Images captions:

- 2017 Florey Medal winner Professor Elizabeth Rakoczy
- Professor Elizabeth Rakoczy and members of her Molecular Ophthalmology team at the Lions Eye Institute, Dr Aaron Magno and Associate Professor May Lai

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